

An Interview with Jon Mitchell



by
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The New Bedford municipal elections will be held on November 8th, 2011. A list of the candidates can be found [here](#). New Bedford Guide does not endorse candidates and we offer our site for any candidate to publish articles. Articles can be submitted to info@newbedfordguide.com. Here is an interview and background piece on Jon Mitchell who is running for mayor. Learn more about him on his [website](#) and [Facebook page](#).

I'll admit, I knew little about Jon Mitchell before he decided to run for Mayor of New Bedford. He is best known for being a tough federal prosecutor, but I wanted to know more about the man who could be our next mayor. What are his ties to New Bedford? What kind of upbringing did he have? What are his views on a New Bedford casino, property taxes and other important issues that concern New Bedford residents? I wanted information that wasn't common knowledge. Fortunately, Jon Mitchell was accessible for a full one-hour interview over coffee at the Celtic Coffee house in downtown New Bedford.



Jon served six years in the Army as both enlisted and officer.

The first impression you get of Jon Mitchell is that he is a nice, approachable guy that puts you at ease with genuine qualities. A little research yields that his path up to this point is one of a husband, father, military man (both enlisted and officer), prosecutor and mayoral candidate. All of these experiences give voters some broad insight on how the man would lead the city over the next two years. To provide some refined knowledge about the man, I started with his family history and childhood.

Mitchell has roots in New Bedford and the the fishing industry that date back to his grandfather Alexander Mitchell, who was the only one of 18 children that immigrated to New Bedford. He was lost at sea aboard the Anna C. Perry in the dangerously shallow waters off the Nantucket Shoals in 1952 along with an entire crew of six. His name is enshrined at the world famous Seamen's Bethel located on Johnny Cake Hill. This history is why Mitchell announced his run for mayor on the New Bedford wharf.

As the child of two school teachers, Jon gained a unique perspective into the world of teaching. I asked him what it was like growing up with two educators.

“It gave me some insight of what school teachers go through day-to-day, both the joys and the disappointments, and an understanding of the pressures teachers go through.” Mitchell explained. “I learned that if you are going to get ahead and do better than your parents you have to buckle down and hit the books.”

His father was a major influence on his educational path.



“My father always felt that the path to success is through education. I was the first of many grandchildren from my family to go to college.”

Before being a Harvard graduate, Mitchell went through the New Bedford and Dartmouth school systems. After asking about what he reads to stay current, it was clear that reading frequently is a ingrained into his fiber.

“I think it is important to read, to be a life-long learner and to be in a habit of learning. That is what I cultivate in my kids. I think I’m succeeding because they like to read. It’s not just for recreation and self-education. If you are a professional you need to read to improve yourself to broaden and deepen your view. People who don’t read have a tough time keeping up with the times.”

We talked about fixing the biggest issue facing the New Bedford school system today; the low graduation rate. A quick

visit to the education plan on his website, reveals the ideas of home visits and graduation coaches. I asked him to explain the reasoning behind them.

“We need to get the school system to change their relationship and foster communication with parents. The idea of the home visit program is to get parents on the same page as teachers,” Mitchell explained. “Graduation coaches facilitate communication and ensure continuity from grade-to-grade, and facilitate early identification of at-risk kids. Studies show that kids hit a point around the 4th grade when they are expected not to just learn to read, but to read to learn. They have to be self-starters and learn more independently. If they don’t, they inevitably fall behind as they approach middle school. Graduation coaches will help with this.”



Jon's wife Ann and one of his three daughters.

It became obvious that he feels the government can only do so much and parents are a major part of a child’s education.

“The government, through the school system, can only take it so far. Parents need to step up at some point. Government can tear down the barriers, open up communication and get involved

in homes, but government can only do so much.”

I brought up the fact that while New Bedford’s graduation rate has declined over the past three years to a dismal 53%, Fall River has increased their graduation rate over that same period. These were similar cities with different results when it came to students dropping out. He agreed that we need to look at success stories and quickly pointed out the success of Brockton as a case study.

“Brockton has succeeded very well at reducing their drop-out rate with early literacy programs by focusing on the increased development of vocabulary with the focus on grammar at a very early age.”

Continuing the discussion on education, we talked about the role of the mayor.

“There is a role for the mayor to make the public realize education is important. Everyone needs to help, not just those with kids. We are all affected by a low drop-out rate. The mayor needs to be active in our school system. All of our efforts from public safety to economic development are tied to education. The mayor is in the best position to build a vision for education and get buy in across the board.”

He emphasized the importance of an education summit that involves parents, educators and all those with an investment in the New Bedford school system.

Regarding economic development and the finances of the city, Mitchell had some clear points on not relying on outside funds and how to improve the cities financial standing.

“The city needs to get its financial house in order for the long run.” Mitchel started off saying. “We rely too much on federal and state aid. We need to do more on growing our local tax base. We need to reduce overlap in city services and collect uncollected property taxes. There are \$13 million in

uncollected property taxes. The city needs to put more effort into collecting these taxes and It would fund itself.”

He also believes taxes are too high in New Bedford and a minority of non-paying property owners hurt the majority tax base.

“The vast majority of residents are paying their taxes on time and end up picking up the slack for the other 5%. To ensure tax fairness we need to put more resources into tax collection so others aren’t punished [with higher taxes]. We can also assist those that have trouble paying their taxes by putting them on a plan.”



Developers are required to spend \$500 million and pay a 25% daily tax on any MA casino.

I changed the subject to another important, yet hot topic in New Bedford and Massachusetts; the issue of a casino. I researched the subject deeply and wanted to know as the potential chief executive of New Bedford, what were his thoughts on the subject. I asked him if he was for or against a casino in New Bedford.

“It depends on the proposal. If it is good for New Bedford I’ll support. The question is where do you look for guidance? The Atlantic City experience is something to look at as a

fellow sea-side city, which really hasn't been a success. I'd want to see real job projections [for New Bedford residents]. I'd want to see real revenue projections [for the city]. It concerns me that in the current legislation that a Boston area casino will be created. The idea of a New Bedford casino is to bring people from Boston and the surrounding areas. People tend to gamble close to home. If there is one near Boston, one in Rhode Island and two mega-casinos in Connecticut, where are the people going to come from to gamble in a New Bedford casino?"

The conversation quickly turned to the protection of local business.

"Casinos by nature are designed to retain people, so you have to consider whether a casino will mesh well with the rest of the community. Traditionally, casinos haven't been designed to integrate well with communities. A New Bedford casino would have to be designed differently than other casinos. You can't have a set of [corporate] restaurants coming in and taking business from the rest of the city. Also, crime is an issue and a real risk. I know this as a former federal prosecutor. You can mitigate some of it, but not all of it. Also, what happens if congress legalizes internet gambling? If that happens people may just stay at home."

I turned to the subject of absentee landlords, those that own property in New Bedford, but do little to maintain or improve their properties.

"The absentee landlord problem centers around landlords that own dozens of properties and are unwilling to put money into them. People are coming to New Bedford from Boston and Brockton for cheaper properties. This puts a strain on city resources to include the school system, police and firemen. The city needs to enforce the codes to ensure the properties don't fall into disrepair."

His solution?

“The city should put together a task force to include a police officer, fireman and code inspector to go out and start to aggressively enforce the existing codes. Also, some properties are beyond repair and need to be cleaned up. These single properties bring down the value of all the properties on that block.”

Moving on, I asked Mitchell about the Buttonwood Park Zoo expansion, which has become a hot topic in New Bedford over the past few years. He is a board member of the Buttonwood Park Zoological Society and has some clear ideas on the subject.



Ruthy recently
celebrated 25
years at
Buttonwood Park
Zoo.

“The zoo needs to change to remain viable. Attendance and revenue are dropping because the Zoo doesn’t have new exhibits. The zoo has to look at ways improve attendance by getting more charismatic animals. We have Ruthy and Emily, but these are the same attractions since my grandparents took me to the zoo. A minor expansion or compromise is needed.

Generally, I agree with what Mayor Lang is proposing.”

Next, we talked about improving the city’s communication with the residents.

“We need to re-establish the tourism and marketing director position. Also, the city’s website contains a lot of good content, but is tough to navigate. I’d look at other cities that do it well and make our website user friendly.”

Finally, I asked who inspires him the most. With little thought, the answer seemed obvious to him.

“I gain a lot of inspiration from the World War II generation. People who went off to war after struggling through the Great Depression. They served the war, came back and made the most of their opportunities. They built up businesses and started families.”

He shared a personal story with me.

“I was visiting the Taber Street Nursing home a few months ago while campaigning and I met a World War II veteran named John. I walked into his room and noticed he was on oxygen. He sat right up in bed. He was a big, burly guy who conveyed strength though he was sick. He sat up and shook my hand with a strong grip. The first thing he said was, “are you hear to get my vote?” I replied, “As a matter of fact, I am.”

John passed away the shortly before the interview and it was obvious the meeting was a positive memory for Mitchell.

The interview concluded after an hour of discussion. I came away with a deeper understanding of Jon Mitchell’s background and his policies on important topics like education, the economy, Buttonwood Park and a possible casino in New Bedford. Hopefully, you’ve learned something new about the man who just may be our next mayor. Please take a moment to leave a comment!

New Bedford Guide doesn't back any candidate for mayor or other public office. Interviews were offered to all mayoral candidates to include Tony Cabral and Linda Morad (during the previous election). The idea behind candidate interviews is to provide a unique perspective for New Bedford voters. Read up or watch videos on all the candidates here and don't forget to vote on November 8th!

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